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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 016609

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SUBJECT: CUBA HUMAN RIGHTS ROUNDUP AUGUST 18, 2006

REF: A. HAVANA 15931

[¶](#)B. HAVANA 15860

HAVANA 00016609 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: The Catholic Church's senior official in Cuba, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, celebrated a mass for recently deceased pro-democracy activist Gustavo Arcos on August 17, with diplomats, activists and journalists in attendance. For an hour, at least, Arcos got his dying wish of a unified opposition. Dissident doctor Darsi Ferrer remained out of jail, eight days after publicly calling on Cubans to defy the regime. He is hoping the "Ladies in White" and others in the opposition will sign a statement calling for the release of political prisoners. Independent journalist Albert Dubochet Hernandez provides a harrowing account of his past 12 months in a maximum-security prison. Veteran activist Elizardo Sanchez is out of commission, dealing with unspecified health problems. The political situation has sent a jolt of fear through the dissident community. End Summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the top Catholic official in Cuba, held a mass August 17 at a Havana church for Gustavo Arcos, the grandfather of Cuba's human rights movement, who died of natural causes August 9. Journalists covered the event, which was attended by more than 100 people, including USINT COM and diplomats from Britain, Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland. A Who's Who of dissidents was present, including Oswaldo Paya, Martha Beatriz Roque, Vladimiro Roca and various "Ladies in White." Plainclothes State Security agents and Communist militants were on standby outside, though their services were not needed. The mass was uneventful, with Cardinal Ortega addressing Arcos' death but not delving into his Revolutionary past or dissident activities, which spanned half a century. For an hour, at least, Arcos got his dying wish: the unification of Cuba's dissident community. Most of the pro-democracy activists left hurriedly after the service.

[¶](#)3. (C) Cardinal Ortega, who had been criticized in some quarters for recently praying for Fidel Castro's recovery, performed the mass at the request of Roque, who along with fellow dissident Miguel Valdez Tamayo met with the Cardinal for three and a half hours on August 14. Roque tells us that discussion was combative, with the Cardinal addressing her as if she were a USG official: "If, during the transition, any properties are returned, the Church will oppose this!" Roque, for her part, says she challenged Ortega on his recent statement that the Church would oppose any US intervention in Cuba, asking what prompted him to make the assertion.

OUTSPOKEN FERRER STILL FREE

¶ 14. (S) As of August 17, dissident doctor Darsi Ferrer (protect) remained out of jail, eight days after publicly calling on Cubans not to cooperate with the regime (reftel A). Ferrer met with Laura Pollan, a unifying figure in the Ladies in White, on August 17 to discuss his proposal to come up with a statement calling on the GOC to release political prisoners by a certain date (perhaps September 10, a day before the Non-Aligned Movement starts its Havana meetings). Pollan seemed open to the idea and said she would raise the matter August 18 at the Ladies' monthly tea at her house. Ferrer envisioned approaching other activists, including Paya and possibly Roque. (Note: Pollan and Ferrer wrestled slightly over how exactly to define "political prisoners"; Pollan wants to avoid seeking the liberation of anyone with blood on his hands. End Note.)

JOURNALIST RECOUNTS YEAR BEHIND BARS

¶ 15. (C) Less than a fortnight after Albert Dubochet Hernandez's release from a maximum-security prison, where he spent one year for crimes he says he did not commit, the independent journalist was back to his usual routine of visiting the USINT Internet center. Dubochet, 46, of Habana Press, described his ordeal to Poloff on August 18. On July 28, 2005, a coworker informed him that Radio Marti had called for him, hoping to confirm a news story. Dubochet went to his rural home in Artemisa, Havana Province, took a call from Radio Marti and confirmed that a home-made bomb had exploded at the local People's Power office, causing structural damage but no casualties. The following day, a group of police officers arrived at his house, arrested Dubochet and hauled him away. Six days later, a court sentenced him to one year for resisting arrest and disrespect (of GOC officials). Dubochet says he offered no resistance and calls the

HAVANA 00016609 002.2 OF 002

disrespect charge a fabrication. From August 5, 2005 until August 5, 2006, Dubochet was incarcerated, first at Melena prison and then at Quivicán, both in Havana Province. The experience was not without its horrors.

"THE FOOD DOES NOT SUSTAIN LIFE"

¶ 16. (C) Dubochet, a dissident since 1999, earned the wrath of police through his investigative reporting on police aggression against dissidents. In 2001, he caused embarrassment by exposing the disappearance from a museum of a priceless, 17th Century artwork. (The "national treasure" was likely pilfered for private resale, he says.) Dubochet says that although prison food has improved in recent years, "It does not sustain human life, and inmates rely on care packages from relatives to survive." Preventable ailments like beri-beri are common, he says, adding that his cell, home to 150 men, was about the length of a bowling lane and three times as wide. Violence is common, he says, much of it unprovoked. "There were two suicides at Quivicán while I was there," a hanging and an overdose. He says hygiene is awful, although daily showers are the norm. There is no library access and no sports gear. The TV is turned on at night, and 50 packs of cigarettes will buy you a session with a visiting (female) prostitute, with the guard's cooperation. The only drugs available are pills, and the only inmates able to get them, from guards, are snitches who watch political prisoners.

"SHOCK" OVER HANDOVER OF POWER

¶ 17. (C) Dubochet, who pledges to continue his dissident activities, describes a scene of "shock and commotion" at Quivicán after inmates viewed the TV announcement on Fidel's temporarily handover of power. Hours later, he says, a

number of additional guards appeared at the prison, equipped with dogs. "They carried out a thorough search. You could tell they were nervous."

ELIZARDO SANCHEZ AILING

¶8. (C) Dissident Gerardo Sanchez, brother of Elizardo Sanchez of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, told us August 15 that his brother is convalescing outside of Havana and dealing with unspecified health problems. Gerardo hints that tobacco and alcohol have taken their toll. On the political situation, Gerardo describes the Cuban Government as "paralyzed" but says the people will accept Raul, because they have no choice. Regarding the opposition, Gerardo says: "The capital sin of the dissidents is too much fear. There can never be a million people if there's not one first."

PERVASIVE FEAR

¶9. (C) Independent journalist Aimee Cabrera told us August 16 that there is "major confusion" surrounding the political situation. "Everything seems to indicate that the Government wants no change. Among (independent) journalists, there is fear of a new crackdown." Laura Pollan, the leading Lady in White, agrees. "There is much fear among the Ladies," she told us August 17. "Raul is a military repressor, not a political animal," and he could set in motion a brutal wave of repression against the opposition, she says.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Cardinal Ortega deserves some credit for performing the mass as a gesture to Cuba's activists, after having made a very public call for Fidel's recovery. On the other hand, Arcos still had a level of prestige and respect in the GOC, owing to his revolutionary credentials. A young Castro sister (either Emma or Augustina) visited Arcos' widow last week. At a time of profound political uncertainty, the activists showed courage in attending the mass. We only wish this courage extended to bridge-building within the dissident community. This is precisely what Darsi Ferrer is trying to achieve, but given the myriad fissures in relations among activists, he has his work cut out for him.

PARMLY